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Young people's representations of the future and the acceleration of time. A generational approach

Carmen Leccardi



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Abstract

This paper makes use of a generational approach to deal with the theme of the future and biographical projectuality in the epoch of the acceleration of time. Its object is to analyse the strategies, to the extent that they exist, through which young people in the new century come to grips with a future that is more and more uncertain both economically and socially. Young people today seem to be constructing their own time of life in such a way as to keep pace with a society characterised by ever more accelerated temporal rhythms – a society capable of pulverising the very idea of the future and of temporal continuity. The paper aims to concentrate on these new modalities, comparing them, in particular, with the relationship with the future that was constructed by the generation of the baby boomers. For this earlier generation of young people, in fact, the centrality of intergenerational conflict within a horizon of economic expansion was able to give an impulse to the construction of a projectuality that was at one and the same time collective and individual.

Keywords: Future, generations, high-speed society, projectuality, biographical construction

Darstellungen der Zukunft bei jungen Menschen und die Beschleunigung der Zeit – Ein generationenübergreifender Ansatz

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag betrachtet mittels eines generationellen Ansatzes das Thema der Zukunft und der biographischen Projektierung in der Epoche der Zeitbeschleunigung. Das Ziel ist eine Analyse der Strategien der Jugendlichen, sich mit ihren wirtschaftlichen wie gesellschaftlichen Problemen in einer immer ungewisseren Zukunft auseinanderzusetzen. Sie bewegen sich in einer immer „situativer“ angelegten Zeitkonstruktion; somit können sie sich zustimmend mit einer Gesellschaft in Einklang bringen, die durch ein beschleunigtes soziales Tempo gekennzeichnet ist und insofern die Idee der Zukunft sowie der zeitlichen Kontinuität zu pulverisieren vermag. Um diesen Prozess näher zu beleuchten, gilt das besondere Augenmerk der Untersuchung den Modalitäten der Zukunftskonstruktionen bei den *baby boomers*. Bei dieser Generation hat in der Tat der intergenerationelle Konflikt im Rahmen der Wirtschaftsexpansion uneingeschränkte, individuelle und zugleich kollektive Formen von Projektierungsfähigkeit angetrieben.

Schlagworte: Zukunft, Generationen, Projektierungsfähigkeit, biographische Konstruktion

1 Introduction

A great many reasons are put forward today to account for the renewed attention that sociology has dedicated over the last few decades to the theme of generations. The most common explanation is without doubt the one that points to the intensity of current-day demographic changes that are provoking new conflicts between adult and young generations over the distribution of increasingly scarce economic and social resources (e.g. Kohli 1996). No less revealing, however, is the interest in the relationship between generations and forms of collective identity. In a phase in which the processes of individualisation are becoming more and more intense (e.g. Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 2001), the theme of generations offers an assurance of a reading of the social that is particularly attentive to the ties between the individual and the collective (e.g. Turner/Eyerman 1999). In the final analysis it is possible to argue that it is the strict link between the question of generations and the processes of historical-social change that renders the conceptual category in question especially stimulating at the present time.

As is well known, we live in an historical period marked by a rapid acceleration in the speed of change, in which the acceleration of time operates as an important strategic dimension (e.g. Rosa 2005; Rosa/Scheuerman 2009). As a result social uncertainty is increasing, impacting to a huge extent on social institutions themselves and on their capacity to construct models of action. In these circumstances the succession of the various generations – according to a perspective that was opened up by *Karl Mannheim* (1928/1952) in the first half of last century and whose legacy acts as a backdrop to this paper – continues to place at our disposal a useful compass with which to orient ourselves. In fact, the symbiosis between the category of generations and the dynamics of change is very close: on the one hand, the various generations can be considered to be an effect of the processes of change; on the other, they can legitimately be identified as one of their causes (e.g. Cavalli 1994).

If these factors constitute some of the reasons that render the sociological analysis of generations particularly fecund at the present time, from the vantage point of a sociologist of culture long engaged in the analysis of the condition of youth and the experience of time, the attention towards generations and their cultural and political dynamics appears, if possible, even more pertinent. Each generation can in fact be considered to be the bearer not only of specific visions of the world and history, of highly distinctive cultural traits, but also of particular representations of time.

In this paper we focus on the relationship with the future constructed by two different generations¹ of young Europeans: on the one hand, the generation of the baby-boomers, the so-called “Lucky Generation” of the 1960’s; and, on the other, the generation of the new millennium, obliged to come to grips with an on-going climate of economic and social uncertainty and with a growing acceleration of time. Before dealing directly with this relationship, however, it is necessary to make a short digression, taking into consideration the theme of temporal acceleration itself and framing it in terms of the co-ordinates of contemporary society.

2 Social acceleration and the acceleration of time

Social acceleration is certainly not a phenomenon confined to our times. It is the modern age that, according to *Koselleck* (1979), has been characterised by an acceleration of change that erodes experiences, or in other words, by the shortening of the tracts of time that allow for homogeneous experience. Already mid-way through the 18th century, before the spread of the process of the technicisation of communications and information, the experience of the acceleration of time was becoming general. Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century there was already a widespread sensation that time was “getting away” and that what once had gone at a walking pace was now galloping.

The spectacular technological innovations that took place between the middle of the 19th century and the First World War gave life to a new *Zeitgeist*, profoundly transforming the collective experience of time and space (e.g. *Berman* 1982). As a consequence of the growing speed in the circulation of goods, people and information and of the corresponding reduction in the distance between places – a process that was a function of the need to increase the speed of the circulation of capital – the rhythm of life also became more intense. As *Nowotny* (1994) has shown, the twofold notion of the quantification of time plus acceleration, inserted into an historical horizon constructed around the idea of linearity, offered the bases for the capitalistic process of accumulation.

Although social acceleration, then, is a process that is at least two centuries old, in the last few decades it has assumed a strategic centrality in relation to the massive and pervasive spread of new information technologies and to the possibilities that these technologies offer – thanks to their speed – of conquering ever more extensive economic and financial spaces. The time of the market, by now planetary in nature (e.g. *Laïdi* 1999), basically imposes a further acceleration of that speed that in a defining manner distinguishes the modern age from preceding ages. Thus, from this perspective the constitutive character of globalisation might be identified in the propulsion towards a global time, a single temporal system at whose centre stands the principle of instantaneity.

Here too, then, is to be found the origin of the ever more intense daily pressure towards the acceptance of everything that “goes faster” (e.g. *Gleick* 1999)² – a synonym of greater efficiency and competitiveness in the market. However, while time-saving is increasing thanks in particular to new technology, at the same time in an apparently contradictory way our sensation of a scarcity of time is also increasing. Out of this paradox arises a conception of the “acceleration society” as the form of society within which, according to *Hartmut Rosa*, “technological acceleration and the growing scarcity of temporal resources (i.e. the acceleration in the rhythm of life) take place simultaneously” (*Rosa* 2009, p. 87). From this point of view Western societies appear to have become out-and-out ‘nanocracies’, as it has been proposed, not without a vein of humour, to rename them, on the basis of the absolute pre-eminence within them of the dimension of speed – or, more exactly, of simultaneity (e.g. *Roberts* 1998).

But what are the most important collateral effects of the acceleration of time (e.g. *Hassan* 2009)? Without doubt they include the following: the contraction in temporal horizons and the dominion of the “short term”; the out-and-out hegemony of the *deadline*, elaborated as a principle of action; the discrediting of perspectives founded on the idea of “once and for all” (i.e. irreversibility); the spread of a culture of the provisory;

and the growing difficulty in relating to the future and constructing projects. Let us try to consider this last issue more closely, starting from an analysis of biographical time.

3 Biographical time and the future

One of the fields in which the legacy of Mannheim has long found extensive expression is the study of collective memory from a generational point of view (e.g. *Bodnar* 1996; *Schuman/Scott* 1989). By contrast, up to today very little attention has been dedicated by sociology to the relationship between generations and another dimension of time – that of the future. In spite of the fact that what is involved is a theme of significant strategic importance for capturing and analysing the cultural and political representations of a generation and understanding its action strategies, the issue has long been underestimated by the sociology of youth. As we will see shortly, contrary to what seems to be widely assumed, the thought on orientations towards the future constitutes a transparent instrument to analyse youth cultures and generational semantics (e.g. *Corsten* 1999). As such, it has already generated an empirically grounded and highly stimulating debate principally around the question of the presence or otherwise of forms of projectuality among the members of the generation of the new millennium (for a summary of this debate see *Woodman* 2011).

One useful link between the issue of the future (e.g. *Adam/Grove* 2007) and that of generations is constituted by biographical time. Biographical time can be understood as the temporal dimension that emerges as the outcome of the processes through which subjects relate to the past, live their own present and enter into relationship with the future. Phenomenological sociology, in elaborating its interest in *Lebenswelt*, has produced a significant analysis of biographical time. Discussing the relationship between time and identity, *Luckmann* (1993) identifies three complementary and tightly interwoven levels of identity: the level of inner time, inseparable from the corporeal dimension and experienced as *durée*; the level of intersubjective time, which consists in the “vivid present” of face-to-face interactions and the synchronization of flows of consciousness; and the level of biographical time, in which individuals give meaning to their life-courses on the basis of interpretative schemes drawn from the stock of knowledge socially available at a particular historical time (of which the dominant temporal conceptions are an integral part).

Let us consider this last dimension in detail. According to *Luckmann* (1993), biographical time consists in the interpretative cognitive schemata which people use to build a bridge between their life-times and the temporal space lying beyond them. A person's life therefore inheres to a dimension that exists beyond both inner and intersubjective time because it is embedded in historical time. Viewed in this light, biographical schemes – temporal categories internal to the socially available stock of knowledge – can be seen as cognitive solutions to the problem of the finiteness of human life. More generally, they may be interpreted as normative models which enable the integration of short-term with long-time temporal sequences of action, and individual time with institutional times. Through their, and on the basis of the life projects whose formulation they provide for, more distant time-horizons are related to everyday actions, and vice versa. Moreover, because biographical schemes link individual lives with longer social durations, they are instruments of prime importance in constructing

an individual's narratives. Hence they are simultaneously expressions of subjectivity and components of the socio-historical world.

Given the close tie, as is also evident from *Luckmann's* observations, between biographical time and socio-historical time, the mode of conceptualising and of constructing biographical time cannot be other than changeable. In other words it tends to change in keeping with historical transformations in the ways of representing the relationship between past, present and future. It is necessary, then, in order to be able to understand these dynamics, to carefully examine the new physiognomy that the future has been acquiring over the course of the last few decades, in particular starting from the end of the economic boom of the post-World War II period.

In the latter years of the 20th century the concept of an open future, one of the most significant facets of modernity's new conception of the world (e.g. *Erdmann* 1964) and expression of the Enlightenment model of rationality, entered into a profound crisis. But what do we actually mean by this expression? Since the mid – to late – 17th century the future has been separate from every form of predestination and free of all reference to the past. It has become subject to a human dominion freed from the double influence of the divine and the natural. In the European cultural region this new temporal awareness developed together with a linear concept of time (e.g. *Gourevitch* 1975). In linear time the future is considered as a dimension separate from the present and distinct from the past – and, as such, open to control and planning.

In keeping with the profound optimism of the ideology of progress – an ideology which, since the middle of the 18th century has thoroughly permeated the life of the West (e.g. *Le Goff* 1980) – the open, irreversible time of the future proceeded for a considerable length of time in the direction of an unquestionable improvement. However, the absence of references of a transcendental nature and of the belief in the reliability of the past gave rise to a new sense of uncertainty, which the planning of the future was called upon to oppose. In a functional sense, as *Bergmann* (1981) emphasises, planning became the modern equivalent of the magical practices, oracles and astrology of archaic societies. The idea of the possibility of planning the future opened the way for identity in the modern sense: the life plan became the organising principle of biography (e.g. *Berger* 1977).

In the decades following the economic boom after the end of the Second World War the uncertainty deriving from the opening-up of the future transformed ever more rapidly into a defensive attitude. The expression “crisis of the future” (e.g. *Pomian* 1980) aptly sums up this widespread social malaise.

A number of elements served to explain this crisis of the future as progressive time that could be controlled and planned: the collapse of the ideology of progress; the loss of the teleological orientations of history; the expansion of the realm of the possible coupled with the feeling of living in an age of widespread threats and risks (e.g. *Beck* 2008). In such a situation there was a great diminution in the validity of the formal calculative rationality that lay at the heart of modern society. Where social uncertainty grew significantly, it became very problematic to foresee the consequences of one's own actions. As a consequence, the modern individual appeared more and more incapable of making calculations and as a consequence making decisions also became increasingly difficult. And this took place at a moment when, because of the intense processes of individualisation at play, a veritable obligation to make decisions in a multiplicity of environments, including that of everyday life, entered into biography (e.g. *Beck/Beck-Gernsheim* 2001).

Temporal acceleration has certainly contributed to the expansion of this crisis. The growth in the speed of social time actually 'burns up' the dimension of the future. The future folds back into the present, it is absorbed within it and is consumed before it can really be conceived. The present becomes "all there is" (Harvey 1990, p. 240). Within the temporal frameworks redefined by the compression of time-space the present is the only temporal dimension to offer itself as a value, a fully-fledged existential horizon which includes and substitutes the future and the past. The acceleration of social life and its various times renders the future and the past ever more evanescent as reference points for action. To put it more precisely: although the evocation of the future continues to constitute a routine both for social systems and for subjects, it is in fact the present that is now associated with the principle of potential governability and controllability that modernity, through its normative ideal of progress, associated with the future.

4 The 1960s generation: a future of hopes

In the period that separated the Second World War from the economic boom of the 1960s, Europe was invested by powerful processes of change (e.g. *OECD* 1989). In the course of these years much of the continent left behind the traumatic experiences of totalitarianism and war, the devastation and ruins, the mass unemployment of the immediate post-war period. Alongside the new-found democratic liberties, however, a large portion of the European population, especially in the countryside, found itself having to come to grips with a grim and oppressive poverty. The phase of reconstruction, then, did not just open the way to a revival of productivity; it also coincided with the opening-up of new individual and collective plans.

In spite of the acute tension in these years at the international level and the looming fear of a new war, the development of industry and the initial spread of a market of durable consumer goods shifted the gravitational centre of social life towards the future and its promise of progress. The economic boom of the 1960s took on the task of rendering evident the interaction between a marked economic vitality and a growing social dynamism. The growth in educational opportunities for the young, the spread of mobility, the emergence of new mass media like television, which characterised an increasingly urban environment, gave rise to a totally novel form of everyday life as well as to new temporal horizons. The generation of the baby-boomers was the first "global generation" (e.g. *Edmunds/Turner* 2005) to be comprehensively influenced by these cultural changes.

In this context, a positive relation was created between the spread of new models of consumption, used by young people as instruments with which to emancipate themselves from the adult world, symbolic tools vehicled by the world of exchangeable goods, and demands for identity: an interaction extraordinarily conducive to the development of youth cultures, cultural orientations for the first time independent of the adult world (e.g. *Heinritz* 1985; *Zinnecker* 1987). Never before had the universe of young people in Europe been as united as it was in those years, quite apart from any differences in class, by a common urge towards the construction of an autonomous biography, released from the constrictions of the ethic of sacrifice characteristic of the preceding generations.

The construction of new cultures of everyday life (e.g. *Highmore* 2002), which had as its unrivalled protagonist the generation of the 1960s, fed on the growth of the greater de-

gree of optimism towards the future that characterised the decade in question. This generation was united by a greater sense of self-confidence, connected in its turn to a greater degree of social wellbeing, which protected young people from the major existential difficulties of life, wrapping them up in a kind of comfortable protective shell.

In order to understand in greater depth the vision of the future that the 1960s generation incarnated, it might be useful at this point to turn our attention towards the experience of the collective movements of the period, characterised – starting out from the movement of the late sixties, on which we will focus here – by a new relationship between politics, personal experience and everyday life (e.g. *Touraine* 1972). As is well-known, not all the members of the generation of the baby boomers were actively involved in the collective mobilisations of those years. Nevertheless, the culture and the orientation towards the future that guided the more active component left a very deep imprint on the entire generation.

One particular feature strikes one immediately: the temporal horizon in relation to which the late sixties movement operated was extremely broad. Within it a distant future and past joined up with the present through the concrete forms of mobilisation put into action. By way of the struggle against authoritarianism and social inequalities there came into being in everyday life new forms of life in common and a much freer form of sexuality emerged (e.g. *Herzog* 2005). And behind all this lay the conviction that it was possible to keep united the various threads that wove together one's own history with that of the collectivity to which one was tied by common horizons and expectations. These were the bases of the generational, and political, semantics that the young members of the late sixties movement constructed (e.g. *Della Porta/Rucht* 1995). Within it stood out a future free from the capitalist system and the reified social relations that it installed – a vision that, one might say, informed the entire culture of the movement in question.

The personal future and the collective future can in this context be separated only artificially, and similarly too the biographical project and the collective project. The personal life project came to be identified with the realisation of the collective project of change. The most vital personal energies of the movement's militants along with the social and creative resources at their disposal were all deployed on a daily basis to reach that objective.

And it is precisely the omnipresent engagement in politics that turns out to be the strategic interpretative key through which to capture the vision of the future that the members of the late sixties movement had. Involvement in politics presupposes the desire to give direction to change and a vision of the future that embraces the long time of history. The philosophy of history to which the movement subscribed was capable of operating only within a long and indefinite temporal horizon (e.g. *Cavalli/Leccardi* 1996).

This long-term future, though imagined as better than the present, was nonetheless not constructed 'against' the present, on the basis of a principle of deferred gratification which treated the present simply as a necessary intermediary passage, a medium through which to construct what was to follow. Instead, the present and the future found themselves aligned along the same trajectory; each one was the interface of the other. The "open future" in which the movement operated, it must once again be underlined, was considered governable and mouldable thanks to the collective action of and in the present. Thus, between the two temporal planes there was no hierarchy; the importance of the one did not cancel out but rather enhanced the significance of the other. The present was a time of action which prepared the future and at the same time prefigured it here and

now. Nothing could be more distant from this temporal orientation than the equivalence that is assumed today between the future and uncertainty.

5 The 'Millennials': new strategies to confront an uncertain future

Helga Nowotny (1994) was one of the first scholars to throw light on the social and cultural background within which the generation of the "Millennials" has taken form. Her interest in the world of science and technology led her as early as the late eighties to focus attention on the relationship between the spread of the normative ideal of simultaneity – tied to the growing economic centrality of information-intensive technologies – and the construction of new representations of time. Her thesis, so far as the question of the future is concerned, can be summed up synthetically in three points. First: the transformations in the ways of conceiving time need to be understood in the light of the decline of the temporal structure of the industrial age, with its characteristics of linearity and profound faith in the ideology of progress. In the phase of industrialisation, the capitalistic logic of production, founded on the equation between time and money, rendered time a fundamentally scarce resource. Ever more synonymous with accelerated innovation, today time is associated in a structural manner with velocity. Thus, in the life of the collectivity we witness an out-and-out "intoxication with speed" (*Nowotny* 1994, p. 26). Second: in the social world the growth in velocity burns up the future in the moment that it is born, compressing the temporal space between present and future and rendering it more and more tenuous. In this regard, an important role is played by the new temporal models produced by the spread of technology: in fact, these models, as well as being bereft of linearity, are heavily concentrated on the present. Within their frameworks, causal logic cohabits with non-linear, non-causal, holistic processes (e.g. *Adam* 1992). Third: as a consequence of these social and temporal transformations, the idea of a future guided by the principle of constant improvement has been replaced by the category of the extended present. This category gathers together the traits of openness, controllability and malleability characteristic of the future at the height of modernity. Its ever more extensive presence in social life has opened the door to a pluralisation of temporal styles and to the construction of a wide range of relationships with time. New temporal experiences, generated by the spread of the extended present, have taken it upon themselves to come to terms with the new "global finiteness of the 21st century" (*Nowotny* 1988, p. 29).

The consequences of this representation of time on the biographical constructions of young people in the new millennium have inevitably been huge. The social acceleration to which the new centrality of the extended present corresponds not only tends to render long-term projects obsolete but it also modifies the temporal structure of identities. Just like biographical time, personal identity can in fact be considered as the outcome of the dialectical relationship between permanence and change, between continuity and discontinuity, between past, present and future. Its raw material is by definition existential and social time. The temporal transformations which we are witnessing are creating a new "situationalism", which is taking the place of the temporal structuration of identity founded on the long term. In this way biographical projectuality is substituted by the choice to deal with situations as they arise, taking any necessary decisions not just in keeping with overall needs but also with the desires of the particular moment (e.g. *Rosa* 2009).

The construction of biography as a unitary dimension (e.g. *Kohli* 1985) gives way to a biographical narration structured by way of fragments: “biographical episodes” follow on from each other, each with its own past, its own present and its own future (e.g. *Bauman* 1995). In the context of the contemporary redefinition of temporal co-ordinates it is the very concept of biography that has been put in doubt. In fact, it was modernity that furnished a representation of time consonant with a conception of the time of life as (auto)biography (e.g. *Leitner* 1982): an abstract and empty dimension within a temporal flow depicted as linear, directed, and irreversible.

The construction of, and the control over, biographical time, then, has had to come to terms with this fragmentation. This new condition can easily generate feelings of temporal anxiety especially among the young. This anxiety does not only take shape in different ways and forms according to the different structural constraints with which young people have to come to terms, the characteristics of their family backgrounds and the economic, social and cultural resources at their disposal. In addition, the manner of perceiving it is variegated, in particular in terms of gender. Research in various European countries – from England, to Norway, to Italy (e.g. *Brannen/Nilsen* 2002; *Leccardi* 2005a) – has, for example, revealed a particular contradiction, to which a considerable number of young women are subject. Often they find themselves deprived of the possibility of synchronising their social clock, ever more accelerated in accordance with the increase in the velocity of collective rhythms, and their biological clock, anchored to the rhythms of the body. In this sense, a biographically central time like that of maternity can be negotiated only partially: if and when to become a mother does not constitute a decision that is exclusively dependent on one’s own and one’s partner’s will. Moreover, the age at which the decision to become a mother is taken can influence in a very marked way the success of the project. In fact, for young women in the new century the awareness of the plural, and often incommensurable character of the times of life constitutes a distinguishing trait of biographical construction (e.g. *Leccardi* 2005b). In the relationship between the times of the market and the times of private commitments the point of equilibrium is very unstable and it needs to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated (e.g. *Oechsle/Geissler* 2003).

While this contradiction has a gender-specific character, a further, more general contradiction characterises the generation of the ‘Millennials’: the increasing gap between a delayed and non-linear transition to adulthood (e.g. *du Bois-Reymond* 1998; *Chisholm/Hurrelmann* 1995; *Galland* 1997; *Pollock* 2008; *Skelton* 2002; *van de Velde* 2009) and the affirmation of a “culture of immediacy”, ever more widespread in all the ambits of social and institutional life (e.g. *Adam/Geißler/Held* 1997; *Aubert* 2003; *Baier* 2000; *Erikson* 2001). The temporal orientations of this generation, an important indicator of what their representations of the future are (e.g. *Anderson et al.* 2005; *Nilsen* 1999; *Pais* 2003; *Reiter* 2003; *Woodman* 2011), feed on this imbalance between slowness and velocity.

A comparative perspective between the two generations considered here can help us to focus on the novel aspects of being young at the beginning of the millenium (e.g. *Leccardi/Ruspini* 2006). So far as the generation of the baby boomers is concerned – the point from which we departed – two particularly useful analyses are those of *Erikson* (1968) and *Keniston* (1968, 1971). In both cases, the postponement of entry into adulthood is represented as being the fruit of the equilibrium reached between two types of dynamics: on the one hand, individual dynamics, founded on the need to have available an additional space for exploring the social world before embracing adult roles; and on the other, societal dynamics, tied in the first place to the new levels of economic well-

being in the post-war period, granting legitimacy to a time of experimentation on the part of youth.

This framework has undergone a profound transformation. The exploration by young people of the social options at their disposal in the process of becoming adults has come into conflict with a horizon that is ever more closed in terms of actually realisable choices. The weight of social inequalities is growing, made worse by the new specifically “risky” conditions of contemporary Western societies (e.g. *Furlong/Cartmel* 2007). The grave economic crisis of the last few years has rendered even more evident the extent to which the social and cultural resources that young people have available to define themselves are extremely asymmetrical. The effects of this process are even more onerous in that the social imaginary is being reinforced thanks to the joint contribution of old and new media (e.g. *Appadurai* 1996).

In brief, the social construction of youth has been changing deeply over recent years. The models of biographical transition founded on the idea of progressive “steps” in the direction of adulthood and on linear schemes are being brought into question. On a general level, it is possible to argue that the discussion today should no longer be just about the “prolongation of youth” (e.g. *Galland* 1993), “arrested adulthood” (e.g. *Côté* 2000), “emerging adulthood” (e.g. *Arnett* 2004) or “yo-yo transitions” (e.g. *Walther/Stauber* 2002). In fact, with increasing frequency doubt is being cast on the very possibility that the concept of “transition” continues to have sense in contemporary society (e.g. *White/Wyn* 2008; *Cicchelli* 2001; *Pollock* 2002). In this respect, the prevailing structural and cultural approaches to the study of becoming adults (“constraint of structures” versus “choice biography”; focus on inequality versus individualisation – e.g. *Brannen/Nilsen* 2005; *Roberts* 2010; *Woodman* 2009) are being challenged. In this problematic context the recourse to time as an analytic instrument capable of bringing to contact a range of distinct planes – meanings, structures, norms (e.g. *Adam* 1990) – shows itself to be particularly fruitful.

Let us draw to a conclusion, then, this discussion of the generation of the “Millennials” by returning to focus attention on the orientations in relation to the future that the young people of our time express. Of particular interest is the relationship between these orientations and the particular semantics of which this generation is the bearer. The principle reference point for the discussion that follows is a qualitative study on the transformations in young people’s experience of time conducted in Milan in the first decade of the new century (e.g. *Leccardi* 2005c, 2009). This research took place twenty years after another study, again of a qualitative nature and again in Milan, on the condition of young people looked at from the point of view of the experience of time (e.g. *Cavalli* 1985; *Leccardi* 1990).

According to the results of this recent study young people themselves are for the most part to be aware of the fundamental changes that their social age has been invested by; they are worried about being able to insert themselves into this scene; but generally they are also very capable in negotiating ways of actively managing temporal contradictions. Even when young people’s relationship with biographical time calls up little other than worry – this is the case for the very numerous set of young people that are confronting unemployment or underemployment – they nonetheless try to maintain some form of control over their own life time.

Notwithstanding the uncertain and rapid social time in which they are immersed, they reflect on and critically examine themselves about the most appropriate temporal behav-

iours to pursue to “contain the damage”, to avoid a total precarisation of the future. In a minority of cases a choice is made to simply take refuge in the present. In others, where there is a lack of economic, social and cultural resources to reflectively elaborate their predicament, the present can become an out-and-out prison. The majority of young people, however, express a conscious relationship with the future – projected or otherwise. In other words, they manifest some form of strategy in their relationship with the time to come.

In this respect, two major strategies emerged from the research. The first expresses a new tendency that is gaining headway among young people who are better resourced with social and cultural capital – comparable from a number of points of view to the trend-setters discussed by *du Bois-Reymond* (1998) – and capable of elaborating in a positive direction the velocity of the changes and the insecurity characteristic of the current age. This strategy (“future without a project”), which is particularly prevalent amongst young men, does not involve biographical projects as they are traditionally understood. Nonetheless, there remains intact within it the centrality of the time to come. In an uncertain and rapid epoch like that of today this control over the future appears to be tied to the capacity to be ready to change direction if events make it necessary, to suspend decisions or to know how to transform them in a rapid way, to the capacity not to allow oneself to be pushed off-course by the unforeseen, to stick to the pre-established path notwithstanding the presence of adverse external circumstances. In contrast to what occurs with projects, changes or unforeseen events do not bring the validity of the approach into question. On the contrary, if possible, they reinforce its orientation towards action. In a study on French and Spanish young people and time (e.g. *Lasen* 2001) a similar strategy has been brought to light: the “indetermination strategy”. This term is meant to underscore the growing capacity of young people with greater social and cultural resources to read the uncertainty of the future as a multiplication of virtual possibilities. The unpredictability associated with the future is reworked as an additional potential rather than as a limit to action.

The second (“short projects”), which represents the most common position among the young people involved in the study – in fact, it extends over a multiplicity of social conditions and characterises the two genders to a similar degree – has at its core the attempt to construct forms of control over biographical time through a privileged reference to short-term projects. In this case it is the category of the extended present (e.g. *Nowotny* 1988, 1994) that constitutes the privileged reference point. Here the reduction of the temporal breadth of projects is the most suitable strategy to face up to the accelerated, unstable and uncertain social circumstances of our epoch. Engaging in short-term projects – for the most part the projects have a temporal extension of a few months, at the most a year; rarely does the period in question extend beyond that – becomes a sort of antidote to the temporal anxiety associated with the ‘high-speed society’. The anti-anxiety effect of this mode of relating with the future can easily be explained. The project in itself acts as a barrier against the unknowability of the future; the reference to short or very short spans of time (for the most part the period of time necessary to bring to a conclusion the activities set in motion) guarantees in its turn a relative biographical mastery.

6 Concluding remarks

According to the analytical perspective opened up by *Mannheim*, the connection between the time of history and the time of biography comes about due to the occurrence of moments of discontinuity, of rupture, which call into question the traditional forms of intergenerational transmission. As we know, traumatic collective events, typically wars, exemplify this eventuality in a very clear manner. But it needs to be underlined that as well as crises important moments of discontinuity can also take the form of other events capable of modifying common sense and everyday order: not just the participation in social movements but also historical developments that are expressed in the form of a conquest of economic well-being, tendencies towards cultural liberalisation (e.g. *Corsten* 1999) or the spread of forms of social innovation. Through this interaction between history and biography the forms and styles of thought change and new cognitive maps and visions of the world come into being. Representations of the future are an integral part of these maps and visions. In their turn these representations show themselves to be very closely interconnected with the meanings that are attributed to being young and to the ways in which young people construct (and seek to control) their own biographical time. In this respect, the new normative ideal of simultaneity breaks up the constitutive relationship between past, present and future and imposes a redefinition of the forms of action in a direction that is ever more "situational". The growth in the speed of life and social time basically tends to be accompanied by the capacity to elaborate rapid and flexible responses, something that is incompatible with the idea of that medium- to long-term projectuality that modernity associated with becoming an adult.

For the "Millennials" youth thus no longer seems to constitute a period of fixed duration characterised by foreseeable and well-delineated passages. Its conclusion is no longer constituted by the full entry into adult roles at work and in the family. Instead, to an increasing extent it is characterised by a wait for an unpredictable outcome. Both the social options available for the definition of choices and action-guidance criteria are unclear; the meaning of adulthood itself has lost its self-evidence. As a consequence, the vision that this generation has of the future, in marked contrast to what was the case for the generation of young people which came of age in the late 1960s, is strongly moulded by uncertainty and indeterminacy. Because of the current intense economic crisis there is, moreover, a fear that one's own future may be materially worse than that of the generation of one's parents. The increasing less rosy expectations in relation to the future tend in their turn to give greater scope to that coexistence with the contingent that is the hallmark of the high-speed society.

Notes

- 1 As anticipated, the term generation is used here in the sense that Mannheim attributed to it. According to *Mannheim* (1923/1952), what distinguishes a generation is not simply the fact that its members are all of a particular age, i.e. the fact that they have grown up together in the same time period. And nor is it the fact that they confront the significant historical events of a given epoch in a specific phase of their life course – the phase between adolescence and early adulthood, capable of moulding experience and giving birth to common modes of behaviour. To construct a 'generation as actuality', to adopt the terminology of Mannheim, there must also come into existence a specific *Generationszusammenhang*, a "generational bond" capable of creating forms of common feeling towards a given historical context and the currents of thought that manifest themselves within it.

- 2 As far back as two or three decades ago Virilio introduced the term “dromology” to conceptualise this process of progressive social and historical acceleration (e.g. *Virilio* 1997).

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